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ABSTRACT

Programs for disadvantaged gifted students require teachers with a number of positive characteristics and a relevant curriculum. The New Challenge Program created by the University of Texas Pan-American College of Education is a Saturday morning enrichment program for disadvantaged gifted children. Students select from classes such as Basic and Advanced Rocketry and Aviation, Adventures in Physics, or The Art of Clowning Around. The classes meet 10 mornings for 3 hours each. Program planners interview and select teachers based on their area of expertise, enthusiasm, knowledge of the needs of gifted learners, and skills in developing student self-concept. Teachers emphasize use of models from the community as learning guides, cooperative learning, experiential learning, concrete examples from students' experiences, and self-concept development. At the end of each 10-week session, students complete a 24-item questionnaire designed to elicit responses that describe the characteristics of the teacher and validate selected traits of a "relevant" curriculum. Over half of the 125 students surveyed listed the teacher as one of the things they liked best about the program. In terms of relevancy, 107 of the 125 students selected their course based on their individual interest and desire for personalized learning. Students also reported opportunities for personal growth. (KS)

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THE NEW CHALLENGE: A RELEVANT PROGRAM FOR THE
DISADVANTAGED GIFTED

The importance of differentiating curriculum for gifted students is well documented and established. However there is little evidence that there is differentiated programs or services for the disadvantaged gifted (Patton, Prillaman, and Van Tassel-Baska, 1990). Patton, Prillaman, and Van Tassel-Baska found that a majority of states do not differentiate programs or services for disadvantaged gifted. "If we accept the premise that disadvantaged gifted students have some characteristics and needs different from those of other gifted students then we must also accept the premise that differential programming for these students will be required in order to meet differential needs"(p. 95).

When planning and implementing programs for the disadvantaged, Renzulli (1973) states that there are two major factors to consider; 1) the characteristics of the teacher, and 2) the relevancy of the curriculum. Teachers must enjoy working with both the students and the program, and must experience a personal satisfaction with students' success and growth. "Must" characteristics of a teacher of the disadvantaged gifted students are a sense of humor, high level of knowledge of topic areas, well developed problem-solving and planning skills, high energy level and enthusiasm, authenticity and empathy, high tolerance for ambiguity and appropriate regard for discipline and control in the classroom (Colangelo & Exum, 1979). The curriculum must be relevant to the student. Renzulli (1973) defines relevant as "a set of experiences which deal with topics and issues that youngsters would talk about if given a free choice" (p. 443).

Current Programming Efforts

In an effort to address the differential needs of culturally and economically disadvantaged gifted students, The University of Texas-Pan American (UT-PA) College of Education created The New Challenge Program. The New Challenge Program is a Saturday morning enrichment program for gifted children. Students accepted for the program are identified by their school district as gifted according to The Texas Educational Agency Guidelines for the Education of the Gifted and Talented (1990). They are further identified as disadvantaged by their school districts based on qualification for free or reduced school lunches according to the United States Department of Agriculture's prescribed poverty guidelines (Texas Education Agency, 1991). Further more over 50% of the students tuition was provided by scholarships from each student's school district.

The program classes are designed to meet gifted children's educational enrichment needs beyond their everyday classroom experience. The classes: Basic and Advanced Rocketry and Aviation, Adventures in Physics, Blood and Guts, Probability and Statistics, Engineering in the Real World, The Art of Clowning Around, The Young News Reporters Club, Discovering the Art in You, The Art Experience, Rhyme, Rhythm and Reason, and Videography, meet ten Saturday mornings from 9:00-12:00. Students who apply to attend the New Challenge Program select their first, second and third choice of classes. The program coordinator assigns the students to their selected class and the students usually have their first choice for the class.

The characteristics of the teacher, as stated by Renzulli (1973), as the first of the two major factors to consider in planning a program for the disadvantaged, is addressed by interviewing and selecting teachers based on their area of expertise, enthusiasm, knowledge of nature and needs of gifted learners as well as skills in developing self-concept. In addition most of the teachers are bilingual and can converse with the students in their first language. This creates an environment that is safe and secure and conducive to learning.

Teachers employ strategies and techniques in their UT-PA New Challenge Program classes that enhance learning for disadvantaged students. Although many ideas are the same as those used to instruct advantaged gifted learners, more emphasis is placed on the use of the community and models from the community as learning guides and creative teaching strategies. For example some teachers served as a facilitator in locating with the help of the program coordinator mentors from the community for those students who had an extended interest in the class topic. This enhanced students' cultural and intellectual development above and beyond the already specialized class. In addition each class exposures the student to other types of careers other than seen in their home. Many of the teachers are professionals in the field they teach about. For example The Young News Reporter's Club is taught by a writer on the local newspaper staff, Advanced Rocketry is taught by engineers who have completed governmental projects for space and Statistics and Probably is taught by a female engineer.

Douglas (1969) points out that an essential element to include in programs is an earlier start toward intervention in the limitation to intellectual development and socialization. Since personal growth of the disadvantaged gifted students is nurtured by encouraging students to engage in activities that are more cooperative than competitive teachers organized their classroom with the assistance of students to allow a lot of group and team learning. This provided students opportunities to build positive interpersonal interactions with their classmates. Because the students limited exposure to books, magazines, and the University itself, the teachers provided an enriched environment by bringing in a variety of reading materials, demonstration models, samples of finished projects, as well as speakers into their classroom.

Classes provide the learner hands on experience by seeing and doing rather than just listening. For example the Basic Rocketry class visited the NASA facilities in Houston and saw first hand scientists and engineers in action. The students then built their own rockets and some students spent extended time after class to work independently on their project. Students helped in the planning of the trip from beginning to end which gave them an opportunity to experience the natural consequences of their planning and organization. This is learning at its best. Students gained self-esteem from having taken responsibilities and personal risks in planning this learning expedition. Because the students raised money within the New Challenge program for the Houston trip by designing and selling t-shirts, selling nutritious snacks during the 15 minute break time and talking to community members about the program for financial support no unreasonable economic demands were expected of these students.

Teachers use concrete examples from students' experiences, from topics about which they are knowledgeable, and from areas of intrinsic interest that make the curriculum relevant. Since the student self-selected the class a desire to learn about the topic was evident. An interest inventory was given to each student to determine specific interest related to the class. Each teacher developed an interest inventory with the assistance of the coordinator specific to his/her class to find out what the student already knew about the subject and to find out what interest related to the class topic he wanted to learn more about. Every effort is made to keep the curriculum relevant to these students. Relevancy is the cornerstone of motivation which leads to a positive self-concept.

According to Loszewski-Kubilus (1992) minority students may have lower self-concepts than nonminority students and the curriculum should include a special emphasis on self-concept development. Self-concept development is emphasized by teachers in the classes where personal responses are invited, encouraged and valued. Teachers help students set external goals for class activities in completing projects and make arrangements for those students who express an interest in working with a mentor.

Student accomplishments are shared periodically within each class as well as at the Share Fair. The Share Fair is the final day of the program in which each class displays their class activities for viewing by parents and friends. Students are excited and proud to see their projects and participate in performances. The Share Fair not only provided a "stage" for gains in self-esteem by students planning and presenting for this day's activity but creates a unity for the program.

Evaluation

An evaluation of each New Challenge Program class is conducted at the end of each ten week session. The evaluation is based on the students' perception of the program. Each student completes a 24 item questionnaire designed to elicit responses that describe the characteristics of the teacher and validate selected traits of a "relevant" curriculum. Gifted students know when their classes are fun, when their teacher requires their best effort and when their activities have real meaning for them. Students were asked to describe three things they liked best about the New Challenge program. Responses indicated 52% named their teachers, the first factor, as cited in the literature, in planning and implementing programs for the disadvantaged gifted. Students described their teachers as fun, knowledgeable, encouraging, friendly, challenging, enthusiastic and having a sense of humor. Teachers provide opportunities for independent learning and trying out new ideas. Students' success is dependent upon the teacher conveying the attitude that making errors in the search of new ideas and taking risks is an integral component of the search. The teacher cared for and sincerely liked the student, communicated with the student as a peer, and was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the topic they taught.

A second factor essential to successful programs for the disadvantaged is the relevancy of the curriculum. A relevant curriculum for the disadvantaged gifted focuses on interests, attitude, and personal growth to enable the individual to find satisfaction in the things he does and find meaning and fulfillment in his life (Renzulli 1973; Douglas 1969; Alamprese and Erlanger 1989). Students described experiences that they most enjoyed, would like to see further developed and would recommend to their friends. Of the 125 students surveyed 107 students self selected their course based on their individual interest and desire for personalized learning. 99% would recommend the class they attend to a friend. 109 of the 125 indicated that they wanted to attend the UT-PA New Challenge program again.

Students portrayed their classes as fun, exciting, and challenging, with a variety of activities and hands on experiences. Students reported an expansion in the depth of their knowledge and their technical skills empowering independent learning. They used problem solving strategies to transfer knowledge to other subjects. Engineering in the Real World, Basic and Advanced Rocketry, and Aviation, Videography, Blood and Guts, Adventures in Physics and Young News Reporters Club exposed gifted students to future career opportunities. Discovering the Art in You, The Art of Clowning Around, and the Art Experiences allowed the students to explore creativity.

Personal growth of the disadvantaged gifted students is nurtured by encouraging students to engage in activities that are more cooperative than competitive and providing opportunities to build positive interpersonal interactions. The students reported that they enjoyed the challenge of being with other gifted students. 106 stated they learned how to get along with others in their class and 112 learned to work better with others. Students repeatedly stated another positive attribute of the program was the opportunity to meet and interact with their intellectual peers.

Conclusion

The importance of differentiating curriculum for gifted students is well documented and established. Successful programs for disadvantaged gifted students consider characteristics of the teacher and the relevancy of the curriculum. UT-PA New Challenge program addresses these two factors by employing expert teachers and planning and implementing classes that are relevant to the students. Teachers must be enthusiastic and show concern and pride in the success of their students. Students in the Blood and Guts were enthusiastic about their teachers: "The teachers are nice and friendly and Mr. Neeley's jokes were great." The teacher is not boring, she has great abilities, is humorous, and helps me with my work was reported by students in the Probability and Statistics class. These student responses document the teacher as a major factor in a successful class.

A relevant curriculum must have real meaning for the students. Students confirmed this by responses such as "You have the opportunity to write stories and take photos," "I can tell you the program is great," "I think I will be a reporter," "It is fun doing things I like to do," "I learned how to construct and launch a rocket," "I can now apply engineering skills in marketing and production," and "I learned tips on how to create a successful manufacturing plant." The primary concern of any program for disadvantaged gifted program must be the careful selection of teachers and the diligent construction of classes that have real meaning for the student. Programs must provide appropriate inservice and staff development to insure teachers are helped to examine their attitudes and expectations concerning disadvantaged gifted. The teachers must acquire appropriate teaching strategies that continue to make the curriculum relevant for disadvantaged gifted students.

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